

Elizabeth L'Estrange, *Holy Motherhood: Gender, Dynasty and Visual Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, Manchester University Press, 2008, xvii + 282 pp., b/w ill., 16 pp. of coloured plates, £60. ISBN 978-0-7190-7543-8

(Art) historians' interpretations of childbirth and childrearing miniatures in medieval manuscripts vary substantially: some view such representations as historical and realistic evidence about maternity and birthing practices, while others explain them as cultural constructs about the subjection of women in patriarchal society. Navigating a slightly different path, Elizabeth L'Estrange seeks to understand the specific cultural and social context of these representations as they relate to lay aristocratic women. In *Holy Motherhood*, which she has developed from her 2004 dissertation at Leeds, the author brings together visual, textual and historical sources to show how images, such as the conception, birth and education of the children of Saint Anne and the Virgin Mary, were 'commissioned, viewed, interpreted, and recycled' in the late Middle Ages (p. 249). L'Estrange situates these images iconographically within the devotional context of Holy Kinship, and by extension, within blessed lineage ('beata stirps') of familial dynasty.

Two theoretical poles have largely informed her interpretation. From contemporary feminist theory she draws on Judith Butler, whose writings explore the function of gender, to question the link in social practice between maternity and the female gender. This perspective leads L'Estrange to reject antithetical pairs (binary formations): male vs female; empowerment vs victim. Rather, the author sees maternity and related images as a cultural construct that may have political intent and strategies. In particular, images of the mother's lying-in and churching may carry a switched notion of a woman's 'perceived' inferior role, thereby placing her 'on top' (in the words of Natalie Zemon Davis) in the social hierarchy.

L'Estrange also charts a course between the differing image theories of Michael Baxandall and Adrian Randolph to build on the related idea of 'cognitive habits', or shared experiences and ways of thinking, in order to interpret how the medieval man or woman might have viewed these images. However, she sees Baxandall's universal 'period eye' as male-dominant and Randolph's 'gendered period eye' as essentialist. Instead, the author investigates a 'situational eye' in Chapter 1 based on a closer reading of historical specificity, all the while acknowledging the 'multivalency of images and inadequacy of gender alone as a category for analyzing spectatorship' (p. 33).

Within this scope, L'Estrange presents two chapters (Chapters 2-3) on the historical practices of conception, labour and ceremonies following childbirth. She ties the preoccupation with a successful conception and the birth of a male heir to the veneration of certain saints. For example, one of the rare medical treatises on childbearing was written

by the physician Anthonius Guainerius, who recommends that parturient women read the legend of St Margaret and acquire her relics. Gaston IV de Foix, anxious about familial infertility, commissioned the physician Pierre Andrieu at Toulouse to compose a treatise on fertility and childbirth. Anne de France, too, owned a treatise on the subject by her physician Bernard de Chaussade, who dedicated a copy to her. Latin prayers with presumed magical properties were also recited, which L'Estrange sees as a means for a woman to manage her social role as a counterweight to those who controlled her behaviour (p. 63). Absent, however, from this consideration of primary sources are medieval sermons and exempla, which often had something to say about social behaviour.

In discussing post-partum rituals, L'Estrange acknowledges divergent scholarly interpretations of the ceremonies of lying-in and churching that may stress the binary notion of a mother's 'pollution' after childbirth vs the mother's purification in church. The author sees the rituals as signs of the destabilization of traditional gender roles. The lying-in ceremony, held in a room decorated with expensive fabrics and suitable to receive well-wishers, elevated the importance of the wife and mother in a way that 're-centred' the household around her. In the churching ceremony, the mother is again singled out to receive communion (beyond the usual once-a-year practice) in the sanctuary in a public event, which raised her importance in the eyes of society and emphasized the dynastic power of her family.

The second part of *Holy Motherhood* (Chapters 4-5) applies the same concept of maternal and dynastic imagery to prayer books associated with the houses of Anjou and Brittany. The Fitzwilliam Hours and the Hours of Marguerite de Foix are the primary focus, but the author also touches on devotional books owned by René d'Anjou, Pierre II of Brittany and Anne de Bretagne. L'Estrange considers the manipulation of imagery and the addition of prayers that visualize and verbalize the need for a male heir. Such is her interpretation in the Fitzwilliam Hours, despite its uncertain commission history and provenance, that Yolande of Aragon (possible commissioner), her daughter Yolande d'Anjou, Isabella Stuart and the latter's daughter, Marguerite de Bretagne successively received this book of hours as a mark of their social status and connection to holy ancestors pictured in the suffrages (SS Elizabeth of Hungary, Louis of Toulouse and Louis IX). Images of Old Testament mothers (Sarah, Hannah, Elizabeth and Anne)—even within fairly traditional religious representations—are seen by L'Estrange as prototypes of God-given motherhood and evidence of a blessed lineage, which could help the secular woman to negotiate her own place in family and society.

An equally complex production history is considered with the book of hours owned by Marguerite de Foix, second wife of François II, duke of Brittany. Bought 'off the shelf', the manuscript then received a dozen full-page miniatures by a different artist, some of which contain the duchess's coat of arms. This mixture of standard and commissioned miniatures receives a nuanced interpretation, in which the latter miniatures of the

Annunciation and the Visitation are perceived as being shaped specifically for women who needed to fulfill dynastic expectations: 'As Marguerite went through the early years of her marriage and childbearing, she could thus have used the Visitation miniature to look forward to a future pregnancy—perhaps one which would provide the male heir who would safeguard the duchy' (p. 229). Marguerite's coat of arms on this page, writes L'Estrange, suggests that she did or was expected to identify with this representation. Besides her heraldic arms, a Latin prayer (transcribed and translated in the book's appendix) was added, naming her and the duke, which is seen here as a prayer of thanks for lifting the 'disgrace of barrenness'.

There has long been a question of whether book owners influenced the selection of texts and images in a manuscript or if, especially in the case of lay aristocratic women, a mediator or facilitator (confessor? chaplain?) participated in the process. This was no doubt important for personalized Latin prayers added to end pages; this mediation provides yet another potential ingredient in interpretative spectatorship. L'Estrange rightly acknowledges that the value of images is difficult to discern for aristocratic women who were largely marginalized within patriarchal society. The author's 'situational eye' offers an intriguing perspective, though at times understandably less persuasive than we might wish given sparse historical data, from which to explore viewer response to otherwise conventional religious iconography. *Holy Motherhood* will no doubt encourage further explorations of aristocratic women's response to and management of societal roles and dynastic expectations in late medieval France.

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